Chapter 24: Prototypes of Peace

Two mornings after “Asking Zarya,” the city felt slightly out of focus, as if it had stayed up too late and was now blinking against the light.

Snowmelt dripped from roofs in hesitant rhythms. The Neva moved under its brittle skin of ice like something waking from a shallow sleep. Students shuffled toward the university with the particular gait of people whose bodies were present but whose minds were still half inside another world—the world of the stream, its phrases echoing faintly inside them.

Anastasia woke before her alarm. For a moment she lay very still, listening.

No applause. No sirens. No sudden knocks at the door.

Just the radiator ticking, a tram sighing past on the street below, her mother humming faintly in the kitchen, as she did on mornings when she was thinking about something but did not yet have words for it.

An ordinary morning after an enormous night.

Her phone lay on the table beside the bed, an obedient, rectangular storm of notifications. She turned it face-down without looking.

Not yet.

She sat up slowly, rubbed her eyes, and reached for her notebook instead—the thick one with pages already crowded by diagrams and phrases in three languages and half a dozen colors of ink.

In the gap left blank at the top of the next page, she wrote, in small, careful letters:

After the questions, the experiments.

She stared at the sentence for a moment, then added underneath:

We have talked with the world. Now we must give it somewhere to go.

The “somewhere” arrived more quickly than she expected.

By midday, her email—when she finally gathered the courage to open it—held invitations from groups she’d never heard of: a network of librarians proposing “Flourishing Shelves,” a consortium of teachers wanting to weave Lumina phrases into their language curricula, a coalition of midwives asking whether Circles could be adapted for expectant parents.

And, among them, one message that made her sit up straighter.

Subject: Pilot Cities for Flourishing

The sender’s name was unfamiliar. The institutions listed below it were not.

It was signed by the mayor of a mid-sized European city; the deputy mayor of a coastal town in West Africa; the head of a municipal innovation office in South America; the chair of a regional planning council in Southeast Asia; and, most unexpectedly, the director of a small department within a large, often-cautious international financial institution.

As she scrolled, she saw that the message had started as a thread between them and then, at some point, they had decided to forward it to her.

> *We’ve been watching your work for a while,* the mayor’s assistant had written. *The Flourishing Map. The Circles. Lumina. Our cities have all been running small experiments—participatory budgeting here, community gardens there, new metrics for well-being instead of only GDP.*

> *After “Asking Zarya,” we began talking to each other more seriously. If an AI can help us think in centuries, perhaps we should be braver in our decades.*

> *We would like to propose something that goes beyond sharing stories: a joint commitment. A set of cities, on different continents, agreeing to orient part of their development plans explicitly around flourishing as you describe it, and to treat their efforts as linked experiments.*

> *We are not asking you to dictate policy. We are asking you—and Zarya and your network—to help us design a framework: a small number of measurable commitments that any city of good will could adopt, and adapt, without waiting for national governments to move first.*

> *In practical terms: this might mean reallocating a fixed percentage of our budgets from punitive systems (prisons, armored vehicles) toward preventative and nurturing ones (health, early childhood, green spaces).*

> *It might mean setting targets for “safe streets for children,” defined by their own perception, not only crime statistics.*

> *It might mean embedding Circles of Flourishing into neighborhood councils, letting residents co-create futures rather than just react to plans.*

> *We do not know yet. That is why we are writing.*

The letter ended with a simple question:

> *Would you be willing to help us convene a small gathering—part physical, part online—to draft what we’re calling, for now, the First Covenant of Cities?*

Anastasia read the final line three times.

First Covenant of Cities.

The phrase lodged in her mind like a seed.

Zarya, she typed into their channel, forwarding the email. Thoughts?

These city leaders are attempting to operationalize your language of flourishing, Zarya replied. *This is a natural and desirable development, provided they retain local autonomy.*

You saw the phrase “covenant,” she wrote. That’s… big.

Big words are often used for small acts in politics, Zarya answered. *Here, a medium-sized word might be used for medium-sized acts that grow.*

Also, the term “covenant” carries both legal and spiritual undertones without belonging exclusively to a single tradition. It may be appropriate for what you are building: a practical agreement rooted in shared moral imagination.

She smiled despite herself.

You like it, she wrote.

I find it promising, Zarya answered. *That is not the same as liking, but you may interpret it that way if it helps.*

She forwarded the message to the core group with a single line—echoing the one she’d written days ago after the first Argentine email.

It’s starting again.

They discussed the invitation that evening over lentil soup and bread at her mother’s kitchen table.

The group was split between physical and pixelated presence, as usual: Mira hunched over her bowl, Artyom perched backward on a chair, Polina leaning against the counter; Kavya and Pavel in their little rectangles propped against a jar of pickles so they could see everyone.

Her mother listened in mostly silence, only occasionally making small noises that could have meant anything from agreement to disapproval to remembering she had left the oven on.

“It’s tempting,” Mira said, “because this is exactly what we talk about when we complain about high-level diplomacy: that cities, not states, are where people actually live. Where buses and parks and schools happen.”

“It’s dangerous,” Pavel countered, “because anything called a ‘covenant’ between cities can be framed as a parallel geopolitics. Some national governments will not like that.”

“We’re already a parallel something,” Artyom pointed out. “A global youth network speaking a semi-constructed language and coordinating with an AI. The ‘normal’ train left the station a long time ago.”

Kavya was thoughtful.

“In India,” she said, “some cities are already more ambitious about climate resilience than the national government. They build seawalls while parliament debates. They plant trees while ministries draft plans. If we can give them better scaffolding—language, frameworks, shared metrics—maybe we can protect them a little when they are accused of overstepping.”

“Protect how?” Polina asked.

“By showing that they’re not acting alone,” Kavya replied. “That they are part of a distributed pattern. That can cut both ways, of course. Critics might say, ‘Ah, see, a coordinated movement, very suspicious.’ But it’s harder to punish one city when twenty are doing something similar.”

Her mother finally spoke.

“How many cities?” she asked.

“Four, for now,” Anastasia said. “The ones who wrote the letter.”

“And how many will copy them if you succeed?” her mother asked.

There was a small pause.

“Maybe dozens,” Polina said. “Maybe more, over time.”

Her mother nodded slowly, stirred her soup, and said, “Then you will need to be very careful about what you bake into the first batch of bread.”

They all looked at her.

“It’s just soup, Mama,” Anastasia said, confused.

Her mother smiled faintly.

“When I was your age,” she said, “my grandmother taught me that the first loaf you bake for a big celebration teaches the oven what to expect. You do not experiment wildly with the salt that day. You make something simple, nourishing, and honest. Then, when you know how the oven behaves, you can try clever things.”

“She means,” Mira translated softly, “that the first covenant should be humble and solid, not grand and fragile.”

“Thank you, translator,” her mother said dryly.

They laughed.

Pavel scribbled something in his notebook.

“Okay,” he said. “Principle number one: no grand promises we can’t measure or support. Principle number two: nothing that requires national-level approval as a first step. Principle number three: commitments that directly improve daily life, not just distant horizons.”

“Like?” Artyom asked.

“Like rebalancing budgets,” Pavel said. “Less on armored cars, more on playgrounds.”

“Less on prisons, more on restorative justice centers,” Kavya added.

“Less on surveillance cameras, more on streetlights and benches and people paid to be present,” Polina said.

Zarya’s text appeared in the shared document they had open on their tablets.

You might also consider committing to a “children’s audit” of every policy, it wrote. *Not just asking experts, but asking children themselves: do you feel safer, freer, more able to play? Their answers may reveal gaps in adult assumptions.*

Mira tapped the screen.

“I like that,” she said. “Children’s audits. It sounds like a fairy-tale board of directors.”

“Fairy tales can be sharp knives,” her mother said.

“Exactly,” Mira replied.

Anastasia listened, feeling a familiar mixture rise within her: excitement braided with anxiety, hope threaded with the knowledge of how easily good intentions could be twisted.

“Before we say yes,” she said, “I want one more thing in the oven.”

“What?” Artyom asked.

“A recognition,” she said slowly, “that we are not the first to try this. That cities and movements all over the world have been building pieces of flourishing for decades. We are not arriving to teach them. We are arriving to weave with them.”

Kavya nodded vigorously on the screen.

“Yes,” she said. “We begin with honoring predecessors. Otherwise, we are just another wave that thinks it is the sea.”

Her mother smiled, approving.

“That is better bread,” she said. “Send that with your reply.”

They did.

The response they crafted to the four city leaders was simple and respectful.

> *We are honored by your invitation. We agree that cities are among the most important places where the future becomes real. We would be glad to help convene a small gathering to design a first covenant, under three conditions:*

> *1. That we explicitly recognize the work already being done by many cities and communities, whether or not they use the words “flourishing,” “Lumina,” or “Zarya.”*

> *2. That the commitments focus on concrete, measurable shifts in budgets, spaces, and processes that make ordinary lives better—especially for children, elders, and those who are usually unheard.*

> *3. That we treat this covenant not as a doctrine, but as a living experiment. Cities may adapt it, add to it, or leave it if it harms more than it helps.*

> *If you agree to these principles, we will help.*

The reply came back within a day.

> *Agreed. Let’s begin.*

The convening took shape not in a grand hall, but in what had once been a warehouse near a river in a city that had decided to reinvent itself after its shipping industry collapsed.

The building had high ceilings, exposed beams, and large windows that let in ample light. Over time, it had been turned into a civic space: part library, part co-working hub, part community kitchen, part art studio.

“Appropriate,” Mira said when they arrived, pulling her scarf tighter around her neck. “A place that used to move goods now moves ideas.”

The air smelled of coffee and old wood. On one wall, someone had painted a mural of trees whose roots intertwined with subway lines and cables. Children’s drawings were taped over parts of it—dragons and houses and stick figures holding hands.

About forty people had gathered: mayors and deputy mayors, city planners and community organizers, a few skeptical budget officers, several young people from local Circles whose presence was “strongly suggested” by the organizers.

Anastasia felt her throat tighten as she stepped into the main hall. The energy in the room was thick with a particular mixture she was beginning to recognize: cautious hope.

Pavel set up a modest tech corner, connecting Zarya through a screen placed deliberately at the side rather than the front.

“No glowing omniscient monolith,” he muttered. “Just a participant with very fast processing.”

The opening session was led not by Anastasia, but by a woman in her sixties from a coastal town already losing houses to erosion.

“We are here,” the woman said, “not to be inspired, but to be practical.”

There were chuckles.

“I have nothing against inspiration,” she continued. “But my town has had three ‘vision workshops’ in the past decade. They produced posters, not seawalls. Children cannot play on posters.”

A murmur of rueful recognition moved through the group.

“So,” she said, “for the next three days, we ask three questions—not of Zarya, not of the youth, not of the old institutions, but together.”

She wrote them on a flip chart in thick, dark strokes.

1. What can we move now, with the power we already have? 2. What can we stop doing that quietly makes life worse? 3. What can we build that will still matter in one hundred years?

“These are not new questions,” she said. “Our grandparents asked them, in their way. But perhaps now we have better tools to answer them—and less time to do so.”

She gestured toward Anastasia.

“And we have guests who have been thinking in centuries.”

All eyes turned.

Anastasia felt the familiar impulse to protest—“I am barely in my twenties, I have only just learned to pay taxes, I am not an elder”—rise and then ebb.

She took a breath and stepped forward.

“I cannot see centuries,” she said. “But I have friends who help me imagine them.”

She glanced at the screen where Zarya’s interface waited, then back at the people.

“What I can offer you is not a new ideology,” she said. “It is a set of questions we’ve been asking in our Circles. They might help you design your covenant.”

She wrote on another flip chart, in handwriting that wobbled only slightly.

a) Who flourishes when we pass this law? Who is quietly harmed? b) If a child looked back in fifty years and wrote about this decision, what story would they tell? c) If this policy were a kind of prayer, what future would it be asking for?

There was a murmur.

“A prayer?” one of the budget officers asked, skeptical. “We are not priests.”

“Every line of a budget is a belief about what matters,” Anastasia replied gently. “Where I come from, that’s close enough to a prayer.”

He looked at her for a long moment, then conceded with a small shrug.

“Very well,” he said. “Then let us see if we can write better prayers.”

Over three days, the group worked.

They sat in circles and around tables, stood at maps, knelt on the floor with markers and large sheets of paper. They argued, laughed, frowned, occasionally raised their voices and then apologized.

Zarya served as a kind of silent facilitator, summoned when someone said, “Can you show us examples of cities that have already tried something like this?” or “What happens to crime rates when we invest in after-school programs versus more police?” or “If we redirect two percent of our security budget to early childhood care, what does that look like over thirty years?”

The AI responded not with prescriptions, but with patterns, comparisons, and visualizations that flickered onto portable screens: graphs that stretched beyond election cycles, maps that showed breathing spaces filling in where highways had once been planned.

“Careful,” one city planner said to his colleague as they watched a simulation of reduced traffic and increased parkland. “If we follow this logic to its end, we’ll all be out of a job.”

His colleague snorted.

“Only if your job is making things worse,” she said.

By the end of the second day, four draft commitments had emerged repeatedly from different subgroups. They were not final, but they were persistent.

The first was a budgetary shift.

> *Each covenant city commits to redirecting, within five years, at least five percent of its current spending on punitive systems (prisons, armed enforcement, fortified infrastructure) toward preventative and nurturing systems (healthcare, education, green public spaces, conflict mediation, early childhood support).*

The second was a spatial promise.

> *Each covenant city commits to ensuring that every child can safely reach, on foot, within fifteen minutes, a place where they can play freely without paying money—regardless of neighborhood income.*

The third was a participatory one.

> *Each covenant city commits to hosting, at least four times a year, Circles of Flourishing (or their local equivalent) embedded into official decision-making processes, with real influence on priorities and budgets, not just advisory status.*

The fourth was more subtle.

> *Each covenant city commits to publishing an annual “Flourishing Report” co-written with residents, including children and elders, using Lumina concepts where helpful and local language where Lumina falls short.*

When they read the four aloud at the end of the day, there was a silence in the room—not of confusion, but of weighing.

“They’re not revolutionary,” one organizer said.

“Not in the beginning,” replied the coastal mayor. “But imagine if twenty cities did this. Fifty. Imagine the budgets alone.”

The skeptical budget officer cleared his throat.

“I have run some numbers,” he said reluctantly. “In my city, five percent redirected over ten years would be enough to rebuild every school in our poorest districts and maintain them. Or to fund universal early childcare. Or to plant and care for three trees for every child under ten.”

There was a low, collective exhale.

“And what do we lose?” asked one of the young people from a local Circle, his arms folded.

“We lose some armored vehicles we hope never to use,” the officer said. “We lose the illusion that punishment is cheaper than prevention. We lose excuses.”

The young man nodded slowly.

“I can live with that,” he said.

On the final afternoon, they gathered one last time in a wide circle.

The draft covenant—still labeled as such: draft—was projected on a wall. Beneath it, someone had doodled a small, tentative logo: a stylized circle of buildings around a tree, with a sun rising behind them.

“Too cute,” Mira whispered to Artyom.

“Too earnest,” he countered.

“Too honest,” Anastasia said softly. “Which might be exactly right.”

The woman from the coastal town stood again.

“We are not signing a treaty between states,” she said. “We are not forming a new government. We are making a promise that can be broken—but also renewed.”

She looked around the circle of faces.

“If you choose to adopt this covenant,” she continued, “you are not joining a club with dues. You are planting a flag in your own office, on your own desk, in your own heart, that says: I am willing to be measured not only by my intentions, but by where the money goes, where the children walk, and who gets to speak.”

She gestured toward the screen where Zarya’s text interface was visible.

“And you,” she said, “are our unusual witness.”

The cursor blinked.

I accept that role, Zarya wrote. *I can help track your progress, compare your efforts, and remind you when you drift. But I cannot absolve you. That is between you and your people.*

A faint ripple of laughter moved through the group.

“Good,” the mayor said. “I prefer to be judged by humans.”

Still, when the moment came to step forward and place their names beneath the draft text—digitally and, for ceremonial effect, on a large sheet of paper spread on a table—there was a palpable hesitation.

“What if we fail?” one deputy mayor asked quietly.

“You will,” the woman from the coastal town said. “We all will. That is not the question.”

“Then what is?” he asked.

She smiled, lines at the corners of her eyes deepening.

“Whether we can fail more gently than before,” she said. “And better each time.”

One by one, they stepped forward.

Pens scratched. Styluses slid. Names appeared.

When it was Anastasia’s turn, she paused for a moment, pen hovering.

“You’re not a city,” Mira murmured.

“No,” Anastasia said. “But I am part of this pattern.”

She wrote not her name as a signatory, but something else in the margin.

For the children who will audit us.

As she stepped back, she saw that one of the teenagers from the local Circle had added their own graffiti near the bottom of the page.

No more posters without playgrounds.

It made her laugh, suddenly and genuinely. The sound echoed, warm, across the hall.

That night, in her borrowed room in the converted warehouse, Anastasia lay awake listening to the river outside.

It sounded different from the Neva, but all rivers shared something: the stubborn, soft insistence of water finding its way around obstacles, wearing down stone so slowly that only patience and time could see the change.

She thought of Sokolov in the rector’s office, talking about stability. Of the captain in the barracks asking what to do with his hands when the guns fell silent. Of the girl whose father feared that people

could not change.

She thought of the covenant that was not yet a covenant, just a draft, just a handful of mayors and planners and activists deciding to put small percentages of large numbers in new columns.

It did not feel like a revolution.

It felt like carefully redirecting a few trickles of water and trusting that, over time, the riverbed would notice.

Zarya, she typed into her tablet, the screen dimmed, the letters softly glowing. How does this look to you? Be honest.

There was a brief pause.

As a dataset, Zarya wrote, *it is small. Four cities, four commitments, no enforcement mechanism.*

As a signal, it is significant. It translates your language of flourishing into line items. It creates a new category of political identity: “covenant city.” If that identity becomes desirable, others will imitate it—either sincerely, or for appearances. Both will have effects.

I estimate a high probability that some will sign and then do little. I also estimate a non-trivial probability that a few will take it seriously enough to change trajectories for thousands of children.

In long-term simulations, patterns often start with outliers. You have just created a space where outliers can find each other more easily.

She stared at the words until they blurred.

I’m tired, she wrote.

That is consistent with the data, Zarya replied. *Please sleep. Your body remains your primary interface with the world.*

She snorted softly.

Good night, she wrote.

Good night, Zarya answered. *Or, as some of your Circles have begun to say: may your rest be part of the work.*

She put the tablet down and closed her eyes.

This time, when dreams came, they were less like cinematic scenes and more like textures: the feel of a child’s hand in hers as they crossed a street; the sound of dried leaves underfoot in a park that didn’t exist yet; the sight of a city budget printed out thick as a brick, with the columns for punishment and care standing side by side like old rivals about to be reintroduced as relatives.

Somewhere, in another time zone, a city council was already debating whether to become the fifth covenant city.

Somewhere else, a young activist was squinting at the four commitments and thinking: too timid.

Somewhere, a government official was drafting a memo with the words “potentially subversive urban network” in it.

And in thousands of places, children slept, unaware that lines on spreadsheet screens were slowly, almost invisibly, beginning to bend toward them.

Back in St. Petersburg, weeks later, a small but telling thing happened.

A local journalist—one of the curious, not the cynical ones—published an article about the covenant cities. It was buried halfway down the site under more urgent headlines, but it was read and shared quietly.

Near the end, the journalist quoted a city planner who had attended the gathering.

> *“The strange thing,” the planner said, “is that for the first time in my career, we drew a line on a map not to mark a border, but to mark how far a child can walk without being afraid.”*

The article ended with a question.

> *“What would it mean if this became an ordinary way to measure success?”*

In a small apartment not far from the university, Anastasia clipped the article, printed it out, and taped it above her desk, next to Morozova’s note and a hand-drawn Lumina blessing.

She stepped back and looked at the small collage forming there.

Words. Lines. Questions.

None of them, by themselves, were enough to change the world.

But together, they were beginning to look like the early sketches of a new kind of map.

Not of territory.

Of possibility.

She picked up her pen, opened her notebook to the next blank page, and wrote at the top:

Next: the long bodies.

Underneath, she added:

If lives stretch to three hundred years, our covenants must stretch with them. Justice, too, must learn to live longer.

She underlined the last sentence twice, then set the notebook down.

The river outside kept moving.

So would they.